

Preface to the Hindi edition of **TEACHER** (Author Sylvia Ashton Warner)

ELLIOT HENDERSON (Sylvia's son)

So far two accounts of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's life have appeared – one written by a professional biographer, and the other by Sylvia herself. Lynley Hood's biography, *Sylvia*, shines an often uncompromising light on some of the more wayward corners of Sylvia's life. Sylvia's own account, in *I Passed This Way* is the artist speaking about herself. We do not seek, and therefore, do not find in it the heavy imprints of brute facts. It is stamped with the personality of the artist, whose life and work are intertwined – whose images and perceptions jostle together in contradictory profusion.

As Sylvia's son, I was in the privileged position of participating in her life over a long period of time. It is never easy for a child to see a parent in perspective, particularly when the parent has delivered herself towards public than the immediate family.

I knew her well, but still wonder who she was. I would often ask her about her life, or her work. She would think carefully, and then reply with what seemed like sincerity, but the answers would merely add to the enigma.

She proclaimed that she was an artist – with an insistent urgency that invaded every waking moment of our lives. She seemed fearful that unless we, her family, accepted this, we would not understand her behaviour. It seemed to me at least, that she was claiming that she had been given a permit - a licence, if you like – to act as she did.

She seemed to make almost a religion of Art – as though Art would occupy the centre of a life bereft of faith. The same question, as it happens, that Salman Rushdie has posed in his ICA lecture "Is Anything Sacred?"

And yet she saw Art as being ephemeral like Life. Life itself was an art form which would disappear. So she invented her life, as much as she invented her work. On the whole, her life was the best work of fiction, she wrote.

Life was raw material – like paint, or clay – and could be sculpted in different forms. But she chose words as her ultimate medium.

She may not have chosen to be a teacher. She was, however, capable of deliberate acts – and choosing to marry Keith Henderson was one. And this required that she be a teacher. During the course of her life as a teacher she discovered the Key Vocabulary, and wrote about it in *Spinster* and *Teacher*.

Of *Spinster* she told me that she had to write a good novel to give shape and texture to her experiences in the classroom. I like to think, however, that she would have written a good novel whatever slice of Life she had inadvertently found herself in.

When I reread *Teacher*, with its deceptively simple tone, or *I Passed This Way* with its panorama of insight and history I enjoy the words, as much as I enjoy the story.

Was it just the labour of the artist which achieved this? Certainly, she worked hard – all her life. She may have been teaching during the day, but she would be at her writing desk at 5 a.m. in the morning, before the demands of family and bread winning took over.

She was a fiery creature – with a spirit to match – and never allowed brute reason to stand in her way, or a malevolent logic to crush the call of the heart. She simply, seized the lead note in her own life and played it without constraint. Whatever she did was imbued with passion, commitment, love. She could bake scones, or play a Schubert Sonata with equal passion. It was as though scones or Schubert had been discovered for the first time. As though Life itself had been discovered for the first time.

She seemed to be struggling to reconcile conflicting roles – those of mother, wife, artist, lover, teacher, and woman. I was never quite sure which of these was humming at any particular time. But the battle provided a dramatic pageant, which, from my seat in the front stalls, I watched with awe.

I had some battles with her. She saw my obsession (as she called it) with reason as being – well – unreasonable I used to try and corner her, trap her in her own arguments, but it was a futile pursuit. She would simply toss her head, rather like an Arab Steed and say. “Don’t bother me with your obsession with reason!”

Talking about Arab Steeds – I once caught her in *flagrenti delicti*, in the brazen pursuit of a crime. I was four years old at that time, in Pipiriki, in the forests up the Wanganui River. She had discovered a clay bank, next to the house – and out of this clay was sculpting a large horse. I stood there perplexed, and asked her what it was. She said, “It is an Arab Steed.”

I remember being seized with a mixture of wonder and dread, and asked, “But what happens when it rains?” “Well, it will be washed away, Dear.” She was speaking from the top of a step ladder and delivered this statement with the insouciant authority which usually informed all her pronouncements. She seemed to be calmly reconciled to the idea that the house would disappear, she would disappear, Life would disappear.

But if Life and Art are transient, how to explain the paradox that she has left us her own enduring creation? If I were to ask her this she would reply (I have no doubt) “OK – do try to stop trapping me in these foolish arguments!”

I spent some time with her in her last years in her house in Tauranga. She was still working. On one occasion she came into the kitchen where I was looking for the salt. She had put the salt in the bowl marked **SUGAR**, and the sugar in the bowl marked **SALT**. When I asked her why she did this, she said: “I did it to confuse the ants.”

What are words if not lifelines to our inner selves. Without them, we are lost.

For Sylvia words are tools of the artist, and if she had her way, each child would, like the artist, use the tools to fashion his or her own life.

Perhaps, she will have her way. Who knows? In the meantime, she has tossed a few seeds about, and some of them may grow.

**Elliot Henderson**

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